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Where Is Bigger's Humanity? Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Describing poor urban black life during the Great Depression of the 1930s, Richard Wright's best-selling novel *Native Son* (1940) depicts Chicago as a site of extreme racial and political violence. Coupled with severe economic malaise as a result of the stock market crash of 1929, the world of Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, was largely indicative of white America's racist and social Darwinist disregard for black humanity. Indeed, as literary historian Stephen Michael Best has argued, "[o]ne could read causally the relation between declining economic conditions and white terroristic violence, suggesting that the former increased idleness and irritability and led ultimately to the latter" (114). For many young urban blacks in northern ghettos of the 1930s, Bigger's rage was an understandable, if not identifiable, response to white racism and poverty.

Yet, many cultural critics and writers would later dispute Bigger's representational value as an accurate depiction of the collective psyche of poor urban blacks during the 1930s. Indeed, in his well-known critique of Bigger Thomas in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), James Baldwin argues that "a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life" (35). To a large degree, Baldwin was right.¹ Wright did not specifically elaborate on Bigger's relationships with other blacks or focus on the "ways in which Negroes are controlled in our society and the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival" (Baldwin 35). Nevertheless, whether

or not Wright explicitly acknowledged the importance of Bigger's relationships with other blacks, it is my contention that Bigger was immersed within a defiantly oppositional black male subculture that not only sought to ensure his survival but also struggled to preserve his humanity. The purpose of this reading is to rethink Bigger's relationships with the other black males in *Native Son* and to explore how poor urban black males created racial community, combated social alienation in Chicago throughout the 1930s, and ultimately made sense of a world filled with racial terror. In particular, this essay focuses on an early conversation in the first book of *Native Son*, "Fear," in which Bigger and his friend Gus attempt to carve out their humanity in the face of racial negation and subjugation.

For Bigger and his friends (Gus, G.H., and Jack), Chicago's Black Belt afforded virtually no opportunities to gain access to industrial jobs or vocational training programs. Desperate to fight off hunger and feelings of despair, their daily routines consisted of raiding newsstands, fruit stands and apartments, going to movies, hanging out at the local poolroom, or simply, "loafing around" (NS 9). A product of reform schools and the macho environment of the neighborhood streets, Bigger reflected the worst of "black male rage" and affirmed for many the prevalent stereotype of poor urban black males as irresponsible, savagely immoral, and inhumane. As Wright tells the story, Bigger was a bitter embodiment of the hate and injury imposed on black people living in America's ghettos.

However unsavory Bigger's male world might have appeared, the social embraces and physical interactions that shaped the personality of his gang revealed occasional glimpses of another side of poor urban black male life. Most often obscured in the critical scholarship of *Native Son*, Bigger's deeply emotional conversations with his homeboys constitute a site of black male community that allows them to purge the psychic pain of urban blight as well as to create an intimate space for sharing their dreams, aspirations, and joys.² In an early scene of *Native Son* Wright depicts a private moment between Bigger and Gus:

Bigger took out his pack and gave Gus a cigarette; he lit his and held the match for Gus. They leaned their backs against the red brick wall of a building, smoking, their cigarettes slanting white across their black chins. To the east Bigger saw the sun burning a dappling yellow. In the sky above him a few white clouds drifted. He puffed silently, relaxed, his mind pleasantly vacant of purpose. Every slight movement in the street evoked a casual curiosity in him. Automatically, his eyes followed each car as it whirled over the smooth black asphalt. A woman came by and he watched the gentle sway of her body until she disappeared into a doorway. He sighed, scratched his chin and mumbled, "Kinda warm today." (NS 458)

In *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero*, literary critic Robert Butler suggests that this depiction of Bigger is one that "most critics fail to

see because his actions violate their standard view of him as a stereotyped 'bad nigger' or victim of society" (61). Focusing on Bigger's "normal drives toward love" (61) as he appreciates the "gentle sway" of the body of a passing woman, Butler suggests that Bigger's desires are far more nuanced than the limited mythology of the "black male brute" permit. Moreover, Butler asserts that Bigger's calm observations and actions expose "a rare opportunity" to see Bigger as "a person who has all the usual American instincts for a life of change and possibility" (61).

Butler's attention to the oftentimes obscured or overlooked psychological depth present in the above passage, particularly Bigger's capacity to "aspire to a better life and a more fully realized self," is well taken (60). However, Butler's attempt to counter Bigger's violent determinism by pointing out his ability to adhere to "acceptable" conceptions of heterosexual behavior between black men and women falls considerably short of capturing Bigger's more telling cultural graces. Far from demonstrating the range of Bigger's emotional depth or his moral disposition, Butler's heteronormative appraisal of the "gentle" side of Bigger implicitly reaffirms Bigger's underlying disregard for black and white women. That is to say, Bigger's attention to and objectification of the physical beauty of a passing woman might suggest a degree of "normalcy" in his otherwise violent persona, but it is hardly a viable indication of "Bigger's instincts for a life of change and possibility." Ironically perhaps, it is in the wide-ranging complexity of Bigger's sometimes compassionate and sometimes bullying relationships with black males through which his humanity can be reconsidered. An unfortunate limitation, indeed, in Wright's exclusionary and male-identified conception of racial community and collective oppositionality, it is nevertheless in Bigger's relationships with the other young black males of his neighborhood that Wright is able to address what Baldwin insists is lacking in *Native Son*: "an unspoken recognition of shared experiences" among blacks.

While Butler recognizes that "part of Bigger responds to Gus in a personal, even affectionate way" (60), he seems to shy away from, rather than come to terms with, the persistent interplay of black male homosociality implicit in Bigger's relationship with Gus. Indeed, Bigger's friendship with Gus, G.H., and Jack—from the warm, intimate exchange "on the block" to the violent rituals that build "reputation" and mask fear in the neighborhood poolroom to the homoerotically-suggestive masturbation incident in the movie theater—illustrates the continuity, cohesiveness, and complexity of defiantly oppositional black male cultural practices, practices that have historically functioned as a means of forging community and sustaining sanity in the midst of chronic disempowerment. For poor urban black males who regularly endured racism, police brutality, unemployment, as well as scrutiny from within black communities and from their own families, the social and cultural world poor urban black males created for them-

selves on the streets, in poolrooms, and even in the balconies of segregated movie theaters were places to commiserate over and recover from the absurdity of living within a culture of terror. Indeed, these urban homosocial spaces represent sites of black male community that foster the development of black male identities against (though largely informed by) an environment of racist repression and negation.

The problem with Butler's analysis of Bigger's humanity, of course, is not simply that he fails to identify all of these "homosocial spaces" in which Bigger intimately interacts with other black males. More significantly, it is Butler's own assumptions about what *constitutes* humanity—and, for Baldwin, what *constitutes* "shared experience" and community—that limit a more comprehensive understanding of Bigger's actions and behaviors. That is to say, Butler's analysis of Bigger's humanity is restricted to acts of kindness, love, generosity, and compassion. In this framework, Bigger's humanity (that is, his ability to express kindness and compassion towards Gus) is at best an aberration, a momentary lapse away from the dehumanized person that Bigger has largely become. Butler's reading of Bigger, while well-intentioned in its attempt to disprove or at least complicate the stereotypical view of him as irredeemable, is ultimately flawed in two very important ways.

First, it implicitly denies the possibility of interpreting Bigger's rage and defiant oppositionality—the norm of Bigger's existence rather than the exception—as anything other than a mark of his despair and forced dehumanization. In effect, it fails to acknowledge how Bigger's rage against exploitation, oppression, and continued injustice might be read in constructive and empowering ways (hooks 26), as well as how his rage and defiantly oppositional behavior might be linked to an assertion of his humanity. This is not to suggest that Bigger's behavior is always or even necessarily a sign of his humanity. However, understanding Bigger's rage as at times "enabling" or as a source of his agency challenges us to reconsider Bigger's humanity not simply in naively objective or positivistic terms (as Butler has done) but as an assertion of his dignity, self-worth, and "somebodiness" in a world that at once dehumanizes and renders him invisible.³ Second, Butler does not appreciate the full extent to which Bigger's entire life is shaped by and in struggle against a racist society. In effect, he attempts to assess Bigger's humanity *in spite of* rather than as *inextricably tied to* the sociohistorical, political, and economic context that bore him. Once we complicate the meaning(s) of Bigger's defiant oppositionality and rage as well as interpret Bigger's humanity in relation to his specific context, we cannot help but see Bigger as a complex embodiment of the bitter tensions that afflict poor urban black males.

But how, then, are we to account for Bigger's humanity if not by looking (as Butler has done) to Bigger's acts of kindness? How are we to make sense of his humanity given the particularly dehumanizing context in which Big-

ger finds himself? Are Bigger's defiantly oppositional behaviors and violence simply the internalization of a history of hate and injury that has led to an absence of his humanity? Or might one read Bigger's actions as nothing less than "emancipatory" in his attempt to subvert the social and political order of white supremacy and control? But what if the situation is more complicated than this? Certainly, Bigger's defiantly oppositional behaviors and practices are destructive at times, particularly in his brutal treatment of his girlfriend, Bessie. But do not Bigger's violent behaviors also constitute the very expression through which he is able to gain consciousness, restore his self-respect, and assert his humanity? How are we to account for this two-sidedness? this ambivalence between self-destruction and self-realization? Can Bigger's behavior somehow reflect both at once?

Let us return to Bigger's interaction with Gus as they share cigarettes and conversation on the neighborhood block. Capturing what is rarely seen from outside the world of poor urban black males, Wright exposes in this scene an array of sentiments and emotions—playfulness, joy and pleasure, rage and frustration, fear and admiration, shame—that mark the complex intimacies and defiantly oppositional practices of black male homosociality. Bigger's persistent efforts to get Gus to "play white" (21), for example, present us with a comical though disturbing moment in the text, a moment that both appropriates and subverts the oppressive social and political norms of the dominant culture. Indicative of a society in which black men are "prevent[ed] from realizing their full potential as human beings and exclude[d] from full and equal participation in civil and political society" (JanMohamed 286), "playing white" is symptomatic of the consequences of an attempted racial negation. Reenacting for themselves a world of power and control, Bigger and Gus take on the "roles of generals directing armies, J.P. Morgan dominating the business world and the president of the United States organizing a cabinet meeting" (R. Butler 89). Gus, humoring Bigger, plays the part of the successful Wall Street investor:

"This is J. P. Morgan speaking," Gus said. "Yessuh, Mr. Morgan," Bigger said; his eyes filled with mock adulation and respect. "I want you to sell twenty thousand shares of U.S. Steel in the market this morning," Gus said. "At what price, suh?" Bigger asked. "Aw, just dump 'em at any price," Gus said with casual irritation. "We holding too much." [. . .] "I bet that's *just* the way they talk," Gus said. "I wouldn't be surprised," Bigger said. (NS 19)

A few passages later, Bigger—acting as the president of the United States—playfully addresses Gus as secretary of state:

"Well, you see, the niggers is raising sand all over the country," Bigger said, struggling to keep back his laughter. "We've got to do something with these black folks." [. . .] "Oh, if it's about the niggers, I'll be right there, Mr. President," Gus said. (NS 19)

What do these comedic displays of white authority and legitimacy mean for two downtrodden black males in Chicago's Black Belt of the 1930s?

What do they suggest about the ways in which political domination, economic disenfranchisement, and racial negation effectively shape the psyches of poor urban black males? Consider Frantz Fanon's landmark study of the psychological effects of colonization on the oppressed:

The settler's world is a hostile world, which spurns the native, but at the same time it is a world of which he is envious. We have seen that the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler—not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler. This hostile world, ponderous and aggressive because it fends off the colonized masses with all the harshness it is capable of, represents not merely a hell from which the swiftest flight possible is desirable, but also a paradise close at hand which is guarded by terrible watchdogs. (Fanon 52–53)

Inserting Bigger into Fanon's formulation as "the native [who] never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler" supplies us with a psychosocial lens for understanding how Bigger and Gus are subjects bound to repeat and mime the legitimating norms by which they have been degraded (J. Butler 131). Indeed, "play[ing] white" reflects a symbolic appropriation and "internalization" of the central attributes not simply of whiteness but of "white patriarchal power"—authority, property ownership, conquest, control—whereby Wright's native sons attempt to personify powerful white men as a means of escaping their own racial invisibility and impotence.

At the same time, however, it seems necessary to appreciate how their performative skits of white manhood—full of sarcasm and insincerity—unfaithfully reenact those same legitimating norms. In effect, their scrutinizing rendition of white male authority ("his eyes filled with mock adulation and respect") functions as a form of mimicry in which Bigger and Gus critique, oppose, and ultimately attempt to subvert racial negation, subordination, and second-class citizenship. As Farah Jasmine Griffin's reading of Bigger attests, "the closest he [Bigger] gets to holding the power of the white man is through this game, and yet inherent in the game is a critique of white people" (125). More often than not, however, the "game" of playing white reflects for Bigger and Gus an internalization of the effects of racial negation on black men. Nevertheless, it is from within this private and guarded space of black male homosociality that they struggle to create a sense of agency, self-worth, and meaning, a space from which they as black men attempt to carve out their own humanity. Unsatisfied by the psychic relief that parodying white people affords, Bigger quickly becomes angry and yells out in frustration:

"But I just can't get used to it," Bigger said. "I swear to God, I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I

feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence." (20)

Wright seems to have implicitly understood how Bigger's frustration in the above passage reflected a practice of repudiation in which his inability or unwillingness to "get used to it" (racial and class oppression) illustrates the more prevalent way in which Bigger comes to resist white authority. Thus, the practice of "playing white" as a means for social critique and self-assertion is but one of several tactics employed by Bigger and his friends to combat racial terror and resist the trauma of negation and submission. Indeed, other tactics or "life practices" that constitute sites of urban black male community are found in the subsequent pages of "Fear." The plotting of the robbery, the poolroom brawl between Gus and Bigger, as well as the masturbation incident in the theater balcony between Bigger and Jack illustrate their collective unwillingness to abide by U.S. social custom and order throughout the 1930s. In these defiantly oppositional practices, Bigger rejects second-class citizenship and partial assimilation into white America, finding empowerment and virtue through the embodiment of the racist sign and signifier, "nigger." In what Abdul R. JanMohamed has called "negating the racist negation" (299), Wright's poor urban black males—forced to conform to the negative stereotypes of a racist imagination—wear the mask of the nigger in a paradoxical move to defy the denigrating social and political boundaries prescribed to blacks during Jim Crow. Thus, while masquerading as niggers clearly reaffirms the mythologizing dominant discourse of white society, it can also be understood as a kind of performance of black male identity that expresses not only an apparent sense of defeat but also an undeniable sense of insurrection and self-assertion.

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NOTES

1. Wright has this to say about Bigger's detachment from other blacks: "I had also to show what oppression had done to Bigger's relationships with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him; how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor" (Wright 38).

2. In *Who's Set You Flowin'* (1995) Griffin also points to the construction of urban black male spaces or as she calls them "the street culture of black men" (110). However, her reading emphasizes a world in which "male protagonists give up any hope of dreaming and seek instead to carve out some degree of manhood in a male-defined street culture and its accompanying spaces" (110).

3. Positivism, as an epistemological method, suggests that one's humanity can be measured by "observable facts"; accordingly, this approach to knowledge fails to address what Raymond Williams points to in *Keywords* (1983) as a neglect of

"experiences and questions which are not 'measurable' in this way" (239). Does Butler "neglect experiences and questions which are not 'measurable'" according to "observable facts" such as compassionate behavior, kind acts, and so forth?

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Public Fantasy and the Logic of Sacrifice in *The Physician's Tale*

Channel surfing recently turned up a rerun of *Law & Order* in which an American father protects his biracial daughter by murdering an uncle who is determined that the young girl be ritually circumcised. With the mother-in-law's blessing as well, an Egyptian doctor was to perform the surgical operation that the traditional African side of the family believed would preserve the girl's virginity and faithfulness thereafter and thereby protect the family's honor. Before the father stands trial, expert witnesses are called, including a Columbia University professor of African culture, and a debate is opened around questions of the value of sexuality and its subjection to cultural belief systems, systems powered by violence. The father defends his own violence with the claim that he just wanted to ensure that his daughter, unlike his own wife, would be able, someday, to experience the pleasures of sex. What seems to me remarkable here is the specter of violence that appears to haunt the very conditions of virginity and chastity, as well as the way public culture assumes a spectral dimension around the construction of virginity.¹